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Mentoring Experiences of New Online Teachers: Voices of Graduate and Early Career Instructors

ABSTRACT

This research study explores the mentoring experiences of graduate student and early career instructors who teach online courses at a mid-size public university in the United States. As members of a centralized online learning unit that works with instructors teaching online courses across a range of disciplines, we sought to better understand the mentoring experiences of instructors who are new to online teaching. Using a narrative methodology, we analyzed interview transcripts and found that graduate student and early career instructors have variable access to mentoring, experience different sources of mentoring, and engage with multiple types of mentoring. We found that graduate student instructors have more access to different sources and types of mentoring than early career instructors, but that both groups desired additional mentoring opportunities. Participants recognized the value of mentoring experiences as part of their overall professional development. We conclude with suggested actions for units looking to support mentoring for online instructors.

KEYWORDS

mentoring, online instructors, professional development, higher education

INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years there has been a steady growth in online education, and universities are increasingly expanding the modalities in which they offer these academic programs. As a result, many faculty entering into higher education instruction are being asked to teach in multiple modalities, and an increasing number of faculty are being asked to teach online for the first time (Garrett et al. 2023). If they are not already, higher education administrators should be asking the questions: What do faculty need to be successful instructors in online and hybrid environments? What is the role of mentors in preparing and supporting online teaching? How can mentoring new instructors help them with quality online teaching?

In a 2020 survey on faculty experiences during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors indicated an increase in the training they received compared to pre-pandemic years, defined as 2019 and earlier (Fox et al. 2020). They were better prepared to teach online after the institutional support they received from instructional technology staff members and peer-to-peer forums. Two-thirds cited receiving support from instructional designers and teaching and learning centers. The survey showed that faculty were using more evidence-based practices (e.g., personalized feedback) in their courses after the onset of the pandemic.

These findings suggest faculty who are teaching online for the first time will benefit from having support systems. This support is likely to enhance the quality of their teaching, which ultimately benefits their students. Some less experienced faculty have access to support at centers for

teaching and learning; however, these faculty need role models who can share strategies for effective online teaching (Martin et al. 2019). One way to provide support for early career online instructors is through mentoring. While there is no universally accepted definition of mentoring, it is often described as an interpersonal relationship that emphasizes professional growth and development (Gabriel and Kaufield 2008; Ko and Zadko 2023). Mentoring can help new instructors develop their professional skills related to managing their courses, navigating interactions with students, conducting research, and balancing their workload. Mentoring can also help build community and reduce attrition among new instructors. Unfortunately, there has generally been a lack of institutional support for mentoring in higher education (Schmidt, Hodge, and Tschida 2013). As a result, there are limited published studies on mentoring for online instructors (Ko and Zadko 2023). Given the increasing demand for online and hybrid courses and a recognition that new instructors, such as adjuncts and graduate students, are more likely to be assigned to teach online courses (Schmidt, Hodge, and Tschida 2013), this study fills a gap by exploring mentoring experiences of graduate students and early career online instructors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Preparedness for online teaching

A few recent studies have examined faculty's perceptions of their preparedness for teaching online. Martin, Budrani, and Wang's (2019) study found differences in faculty's perception of their abilities based on their years of online teaching experience. Faculty with zero to five years of online teaching experience had significantly lower perceptions of their abilities in course design, course communication, and technical competence, when compared to faculty with more than six years of online teaching experience. They concluded that novice faculty perceive they are not ready to teach online and suggest that their findings have implications for administrators who can provide support to prepare these faculty for online teaching.

Bishop-Monroe et al.'s (2021) study examined doctoral students' (enrolled and recently graduated) preparation to teach online during the first year of COVID-19. Of those who had taken required online training in their doctoral programs, 75% reported feeling adequately prepared to teach online. In contrast, only 56% of those without such a requirement felt adequately prepared. The vast majority felt they needed to be proficient in online teaching to get tenure track jobs. Taken together, these studies highlight a lack of preparedness to teach online among new instructors and the valuable impact of online teaching support among doctoral students.

Online teaching professional development

When higher education first started embracing online learning, there was little support for instructors making the transition to online teaching (Schmidt, Hodge, and Tschida 2013). Furthermore, there were—and continue to be—few published studies examining professional development for online teaching. An exception is a study by Vaill and Testori (2012) on a three-tiered approach to supporting online faculty as they transitioned to online teaching; the approach included orientation, peer mentoring, and ongoing support. Their results showed that 84% of faculty felt more prepared following the support program. In contrast, Schmidt, Hodge, and Tschida (2013) published a focus group study with instructors transitioning to online teaching who indicated there was little formal support, and a lack of processes in place to help faculty members new to online teaching. These instructors struggled to adapt, illustrating the value of formal support structures and institutional processes for helping online instructors feel prepared to teach online courses. While Vaill and Testori (2012) demonstrated an effective approach to preparing online faculty, Schmidt, Hodge,

and Tschida (2013) show the challenges online faculty faced when they did not receive adequate online teaching preparation.

The following year, Baran and Correia (2014) proposed a professional development framework for faculty making the transition to online teaching. This framework included three levels: teaching, community, and organization. Baran and Correia (2014) indicated that support at these three levels is critical to faculty "acceptance, motivation, and participation in online learning" (98). While they mentioned that technology support is important at the teaching level, they suggested a move away from technology-centered programs and a move toward encouraging community among faculty by promoting communities of practice, peer support, and mentoring relationships. Mohr and Shelton (2017) indicated that meeting the professional development needs of online faculty may translate into increased motivation, satisfaction, loyalty, and overall success. In their examination of best practices for preparing faculty to teach online, faculty mentoring was listed as one of the institutional or organizational strategies. Both Baran and Correia (2014) and Mohr and Shelton (2017) agreed that institutions should provide professional development to meet the needs of online faculty, but few studies have examined the elements of training needed for faculty to effectively teach online (Lowenthal et al. 2019).

Thus, in the past 10 years, there has been limited progress in professional development for online instructors. Further, professional development programs often emphasize technology over pedagogy (Schmidt, Hodge, and Tschida 2013). Leary et al. (2020), in their literature review on professional development for online teaching, concluded that institutions are still identifying effective and efficient training approaches for online instructors. They also concluded in their review that there was slow growth for the development of best practices for professional development programs designed for online instructors. In other words, they highlighted a lack of guiding principles for training online instructors.

Given the lack of established and effective approaches for developing the online teaching skills of instructors, we believe that mentoring is a viable approach to improving the professional development of online instructors. Additionally, mentoring can be instrumental in facilitating professional development that goes beyond basic technology support. In some cases, novice or inexperienced faculty do not know what they need to know. Mentors may be able to provide the lens of experience to support the professional development of their less experienced peers.

Mentoring for online instructors in higher education

Few studies specifically address mentoring of online instructors. Although Ko and Zhadko (2023), in their book on best practices for mentoring in online programs, focus on mentoring online faculty, they also acknowledge this gap in the literature and draw from the broader body of research on mentoring. In their discussion of mentoring approaches, the authors distinguish between different types of mentoring including coaching as well as formal and informal mentoring. They describe various mentoring structures such as peer mentoring, group mentoring, or on demand support. Peer mentoring occurs when a faculty member is mentored by a colleague. Peer mentoring can be formal or informal and may involve two similarly experienced colleagues or a more experienced colleague mentoring a less experienced one (for more details see, Ko and Zhadko 2023). Group mentoring can be structured and formal with a facilitator and regular meetings or it can be unstructured and informal, such as a learning community that comes together through convenience or necessity (for more details see, Huizing 2012). On demand support refers to a faculty member's ability to get technical or pedagogical support from mentors, as needed. However, the depth of these interactions may be limited. Each of these types of mentoring can be adapted for online instructors.

One of the few studies on the mentoring of online instructors is offered in Gabriel et al.'s (2008) research on reciprocal mentoring. In their study, they defined reciprocal mentoring as a collaborative learning relationship where both members of the mentoring dyad contributed to the partnership. The mentor brought technical and pedagogical skills related to teaching online and the mentee brought content expertise. The structured mentoring program, where one mentor worked with six online instructors, took place over two academic terms. Mentoring was "just in time," which means that the mentor responded to a mentee's needs as they arose throughout the program.

The Gabriel et al. (2008) study offers an example of one way that mentoring can be adapted for online instructors and the challenges of this approach, which were primarily related to time. Participants often found it challenging to find time to meet with their mentor and indicated that lack of time is a barrier to building community. The authors highlight the importance of institutional support for sustaining mentoring programs and suggested that reducing burdens on faculty time and offering more structured mentoring programs might be more effective.

Overall, in our exploration of the mentoring literature, we found, as Bozeman and Feeney (2007) describe in their conceptual analysis and critique, that mentoring theory is underdeveloped. Likewise, most of the reviewed literature referred to mentoring approaches and frameworks, rather than mentoring theory.

Alternative mentoring approaches

Some authors highlight the shortcomings of traditional mentoring approaches and describe alternatives that better support people with marginalized identities such as women, people of color, or individuals with disabilities. Traditional mentoring approaches tend to be hierarchical, which reinforces power differentials between mentoring participants, and formal, which can limit access for people who have competing demands on their time or can exclude people who have not traditionally been welcomed in the academy. Alternative mentoring approaches tend to provide more egalitarian and flexible mentoring arrangements.

McGuire and Reger (2003) present a conceptual framework for feminist co-mentoring in their seminal article. Their framework, in addition to offering flexibility and an equal balance of power among participants, aims to recognize and incorporate the emotion and values of paid and unpaid work. McGuire and Reger advocate for a more holistic approach to mentoring. Cobb-Roberts et al. (2017), in their systematic review of 22 journal publications specific to mentoring women of color in higher education, contend that traditional mentoring, which they define as dyadic and hierarchical, does not meet the needs of women of color working in higher education. They advocate for alternative approaches, such as co-mentoring and feminist mentoring, but they also call for more research, specifically related to cross-racial and cross-cultural mentoring. Taken together, it is clear that alternative mentoring approaches lead to improved outcomes for traditionally marginalized groups, but that additional research is needed.

More recently, researchers have acknowledged that informal mentoring occurs through professional networks (Ko and Zhadko 2023) and communities of practice (Bottoms et al. 2020), which is a type of professional network. Although the Bottoms et al. (2020) study is not specific to online communities, the authors do offer a discussion of virtual communities. This qualitative, systematic literature review included 72 empirical articles that addressed the topics of mentoring and communities of practice (CoP) in the fields of higher education or teacher education. The authors identified a gap in the research on how CoP literature has informed mentoring practices and conducted the review to explore the ways that CoP research is applied in the study of mentoring. This

study speaks to the value of using CoP as a framework for designing learning communities, particularly when the goal is sustained engagement and a focus on relationship-building.

When it comes to professional development for online instructors, mentoring is often sidelined, and traditional approaches to mentoring are not designed to serve the individuals most in need of support. According to a study of how universities with large online programs prepare their instructors to teach online, data from 16 schools showed that only 10 of them (62.5%) included mentoring as a part of the professional development program (Lowenthal et al. 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our goal with this study is to better understand online instructors' experiences of mentoring. As researchers who work in a centralized online learning unit, we sought to identify ways to support mentoring opportunities as part of the ongoing professional development of current and future online instructors. We are aware that mentoring occurs across our university, but we wanted to gain additional clarity around how new online instructors are experiencing these opportunities. In our university, instructors may be asked to develop a new online course or teach an already developed one. Instructors who develop a new course receive substantial training and support from the online learning unit. However, instructors who teach an already developed online course do not receive the same level of training and support. Regardless, all online instructors receive varying levels of support from administrators and other instructors in their departments. To fully explore this context, we take a two-phase approach to our analysis. First, we take a narrative inquiry approach to gain a better understanding of our participants' experiences with mentoring and explore the following research questions:

- How do the participants identify, describe, and experience mentoring, and what counts as mentoring?
- What is the significance of mentoring to participants?
- How do different instructor populations (graduate student and early career instructors) experience mentoring?
- What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of these two populations?

Then, we consider our findings from an educational policy lens, and explore the following research question:

- How might a mentoring policy support the professional development of instructors teaching online?

We take this approach with the goal of supporting research as actionable—and informing policy development—but we do so cautiously. We recognize that policy has "a capacity to operationalize values" and as such "imposes power and . . . patterns of action" (Fransson 2020, 440). It is for this reason that we, first, aim to better understand our participants' experiences and how mentoring is being enacted in our context. Building on that understanding, we then aim to consider if and how policy might support the work that is already happening and support additional professional development opportunities for online instructors.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm and approach

For this research project, we used a narrative inquiry approach. Marshall, Rossman, and Blanco (2022, 173) state that "narrative inquiry seeks to understand sociological questions about

groups, communities, and contexts through individuals' lived experiences." They further explain that narratives validate the narrator's construction of meaning. This aligns with our first set of research questions, which seek to explore how mentoring is experienced by participants and values their perceptions of these experiences. Indeed, we leave it to the participants to identify and describe what they consider to be mentoring.

Researchers' positionalities

Both authors work in a centralized online learning unit at a higher educational institution in the United States. The first author is an instructional designer and doctoral candidate in the college of education and is involved in mentoring programs for instructional designers. The second author is an educational researcher with a doctoral degree in psychology and is involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Both authors have approached this study from a feminist research perspective that values the voices and lived experiences of research participants.

Site and participants

This study was part of a larger qualitative study conducted by a research team in a mid-size public university in the United States with a highly reputable online learning unit. The larger study was approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB) to ensure that the study was conducted ethically and protected the rights and well-being of the participants. This study sought to explore the experiences and motivations of online instructors in higher education. Within this project, the research unit recruited 105 online instructors at the university where the research team is employed. The first phase of this project involved recruiting and interviewing 33 "long-term instructors," who reported teaching online for 10 years or more. The second phase of the study involved recruiting instructors who reported teaching anywhere from one to nine years. The research unit sent up to three recruitment emails to eligible instructors directing them to an anonymous pre-survey. At the end of the survey participants were redirected to an online scheduling software which allowed them to sign up for a one-hour interview. The interviews were conducted in 2019, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the current study, we analyzed a subset of data from the second phase, involving 27 participants, in order to investigate their experiences with mentoring. This subset of participants includes graduate students who were teaching online (n=17), and early career instructors who had taught online for 1–2 years (n=10) at the university. Our analysis focused on data from the second phase because we believed that graduate student and early career participants were most likely to have recently experienced mentoring and/or would have the greatest opportunity to benefit from mentoring as they were beginning their online teaching careers.

In terms of demographics, we collected data on participant age, gender identification, number of courses taught (see Table 1), and number of years teaching. While the qualitative data analyzed for this study involves 17 graduate student instructors, 33 graduate students completed the survey. Sixteen of them did not complete the interviews, but since the survey data was deidentified, Table 1 included demographics for all 33 survey participants in order to provide a general overview of the population's characteristics. As for the early career instructors, all 10 survey participants were also interviewed. One survey participant was initially misclassified, so the demographic data provided in Table 1 includes information provided by nine survey respondents.

Table 1. Age, gender, and number of courses taught online

	Graduate student instructors (n=17)	Early career instructors (n=10)
Age		
18–24	2 (6.1%)	0 (0%)
25–34	18 (54.5%)	3 (33.3%)
35–44	9 (27.3%	5 (55.6%)
45–54	4 (12.1%)	1 (11.1%)
Gender		
Female	23 (69.7%)	6 (66.7%)
Male	8 (24.2%)	3 (33.3%)
Genderqueer/ gender non-conforming	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Prefer not to identify	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Courses taught online		
1–2	20 (60.6%)	6 (66.7%)
3–5	10 (30.3%)	2 (22.2%)
6–8	3 (9.1%)	0 (0%)
9–10	0 (0%)	1 (11.1%)

Most of the participants in both groups were between the ages of 25 and 44, with the graduate student instructors skewing younger and the early career instructors trending older. Both populations were similar in terms of gender and both groups were majority female. They were also similar in terms of the number of online courses taught. Most participants in both populations had taught between 1–5 online courses. It is interesting to note that graduate student instructors had a range of 1–7 years of experience teaching online courses at their institution and early career instructors all had 1–2 years of experience teaching online at their institution. Participants in both groups were recruited from a range of disciplines including health, education, public policy, computer science, and fisheries and wildlife; they therefore represented diverse experiences teaching online in a variety of content areas.

Data collection and methods

First, data were collected from participants using an online pre-survey. Then, the research team conducted interviews using the online video conferencing software, Zoom. The anonymous pre-survey, conducted in Qualtrics, asked for participants' demographic information (age, gender identity, degree attainment), the number of years they taught online, number of courses taught, and course disciplines. While this information was used to provide descriptive information about the sample, the data for this study were collected with qualitative interviews. At the end of the survey, participants were redirected from the Qualtrics survey to an online scheduling site in order to sign up for a structured interview with a member of our research team. The open-ended questions were asked in a standardized order, and participants were encouraged to explain and elaborate. Follow-up questions were asked when required for clarification purposes. The interview focused on participants' experiences with online teaching and professional development, and featured 15 questions, including the one question which is the subject of this analysis: "What kind of mentoring have you received as an online instructor?" The responses to this question ranged from 13 to 559 words with an average length of 155 words (SD=103).

Data analysis and trustworthiness

For our data analysis, we used an inductive approach to identify patterns emerging from participant responses. Both authors began by separately reading and re-reading the transcripts of participant narratives about the mentoring they have received as online instructors. Individually, we read, took notes on, and generated preliminary in vivo and descriptive codes (Saldaña 2021). After reviewing the data individually, we came together to discuss what we had identified in the narratives. Over multiple meetings, we took note of what we were both seeing and began to generate categories for our codes. During these discussions, we generated a codebook that we revised over multiple meetings [see Appendix for final codebook]. We, then, individually applied the codebook to the data.

As we individually coded the data, we first coded all the graduate student instructor transcripts and then applied the codes to the early career instructors. We also coded each population in stages. First, we coded for presence and absence of mentoring in our participant responses. Next, where we identified a presence of mentoring, we coded for the mentoring source. Finally, where we identified presence, we coded for different types of mentoring. After we both coded all the data, we met again, and over several meetings, reviewed all coded statements in the transcripts and discussed any disagreements until we reached consensus (Saldaña 2021).

Throughout the coding process, we each wrote thematic memos to document our interpretations of the narratives shared by participants. Marshall, Rossman, and Blanco (2022, 52) identified memoing as a practice that lends credibility to the interpretation of data because it helps to develop a transparent "audit trial" of the interpretive process. In these thematic memos, we focused on what we were interpreting in the data; in particular, we were each noting connections across participants as well as differences across our two populations.

In addition to this coding process, the second author reviewed the transcripts of the other interview questions and found no mention of mentoring in participant responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of this narrative inquiry was to explore online instructor experiences of mentoring by 1) identifying what counts as mentoring for the participants, 2) seeking to understand the significance of mentoring, and 3) exploring how experiences are similar or different for graduate and early career instructors. In the following section, we consider the policy implications of our findings.

Overall, we found that mentoring, whether present or absent, held significance for the participants. Participants who experienced mentoring found it beneficial, while those who experienced little to no mentoring, often felt they lacked the support needed to excel in their online teaching. Within our exploration of mentoring significance, we aimed to examine the nuance of these experiences. We identified and characterized various sources and types of mentoring. As we explored the experience of graduate level and early career instructors, we found that both populations value mentoring, but graduate level online instructors had greater access to mentoring, while the early career instructors in our study had limited access to mentoring.

In the following sections, we will explore two themes: sources of mentoring and types of mentoring. Within the theme types of mentoring, we will explore the subtheme of access to mentoring.

Sources of mentoring

Mentoring comes from many different sources (Table 2). When mentoring was present in our data, we could usually identify the source and coded for three categories of sources: faculty or

departmental support, graduate student peers, and online division professional staff. We defined our sources as follows:

- **Faculty or departmental support:** Mentoring, including interaction or activities that involve more experienced teaching faculty or faculty identified as peers. Faculty were identified as professor, instructor, supervisor, advisor, or colleague, and occasionally included past course instructors of the participant.
- **Graduate student peers:** Mentoring, including interaction or activities that involve similarly experienced peers. We applied this code whenever participants mentioned graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) or teaching assistants (TAs) as sources of mentoring or when graduate student instructors mentioned peers as sources of mentoring.
- **Online division professional staff:** Mentoring, including interaction or activities, that involve someone whose primarily role within the online learning division is to support teaching faculty.

Table 2. Sources of mentoring

	Faculty or departmental support	Graduate student peers	Online division professional staff
Graduate student (n = 17)	14 (82.4%)	6 (35.3%)	3 (17.6%)
Early career (n=10)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)	3 (30%)

Graduate student instructors (GS) were more likely than early career instructors to define sources of mentoring. Among both populations, however, faculty or departmental support was most common. Graduate participant (GS15), for example, identifies two people as sources of mentoring:

> I received mentoring from the person who is in charge of the online courses in our department . . . whenever I face a different situation or a new situation that I'm not exactly sure how to deal with, I communicate with two persons, one of whom is the person who is the director of the [online learning division] courses and the other one is my advisor.

Another graduate student, GS22, shared this in their interview:

The instructor who created that course taught the other section of it and so in Fall term, my first term, we would meet every week to discuss things that happened in the past week, what to expect from the next week, and things like that, so he was a really great mentor in terms of also just how to use Canvas and how to do this thing in Canvas and how to deal with students and things like that. I guess a lot of the mentorship has come from within my department . . .

Both participants illustrate how valuable support from their department and other faculty is to them. GS32 mentions receiving mentoring from their department and describes experiencing mentoring in a group with other graduate student peers:

> We get good mentoring in our department. We have weekly GTA meetings where we talk to each other about what we're doing. And you can talk to other people, so if you've

> got something that you're having trouble with then you can talk about it there and other folks, if they've had problems with it, can give you advice about what's going on.

Early career faculty were more likely to cite other faculty or departmental support and online learning staff as sources of mentoring. Early career participant 14 (EC14) identifies both sources:

> That would be through . . . other faculty that works in the program. I've received just more that troubleshooting . . . That was one method. We also had some [online learning division] representatives come and share different learning tools with both programs that I work with, in terms of other ways to engage students and other learning modalities . . . Then, I would say the other mentoring would just be that instructional designer, which is more like a collaborator piece, not necessarily a mentor, but definitely mentoring in terms of some of the knowledge that they've been able to provide just about best practices and things like that with [the online learning division].

In this narrative segment, we see multiple sources of mentoring, but we also begin to see some nuance within mentoring sources, which will be explored in the next section. Occasionally, the source of mentoring was unclear or unknown based on the information provided. In other cases, the source was unexpected or indirect. Unexpected sources included students. Indirect sources included examples of effective practice created by others. In one example, EC3 identifies "a product" or another person's course or instructional material as an indirect source of mentoring:

> Yeah, if I were to say more mentoring by seeing how the course is made up. That could be . . . not like really in-person mentoring, but it's with a product. Yeah. Basically, when I see the product, I know that that's the kind of mentoring from seeing the product.

This participant acknowledges that looking at other courses is not "really in-person mentoring," but they imply that they are getting information from viewing this course that they might have received from an in-person mentor. EC3 is describing what they gained without an interpersonal interaction.

EC27 mentions that meetings were a source of mentoring but doesn't elaborate beyond this statement: "Very little. Very little. Just meeting every couple of months. That's about it."

Even in the absence of mentoring, participants often identified missed opportunities or alternatives that they turned to for professional growth, such as in this example from EC36: "None. I've done it on my own. I've adapted, I've seen Coursera, I've seen other online materials. I watched a lot of other instructive videos, and I watched how they present stuff."

When mentoring did not occur, there was recognition of this and, in some cases, disappointment was expressed, but alternative strategies for developing the necessary professional skills were often identified. Overall, the early career participants were more likely to identify the lack of mentoring along with other potential avenues for professional development than graduate student instructors.

Types of mentoring

When it comes to the question of what participants described as mentoring, we found quite a range of responses. Our approach to coding types of mentoring (Table 3) occurred in two phases. First, where mentoring was present, we applied codes for formal and informal mentoring, defined as follows:

- **Formal:** Support that is ongoing and regular, occurring more than once a term, or every couple of months.
- **Informal:** Support that is provided on an unscheduled or as-needed basis; may be ongoing, but not at regular intervals.

After coding for the higher order codes of formal and informal mentoring, we coded for three additional types of mentoring: resource support, collaboration, and advice:

- **Resource support:** Involves limited interactions with people who have knowledge of online learning. They provide answers to one-time questions and/or resources, but do not provide on-going or in-depth support.
- **Collaboration**: Interaction provided by people with similar backgrounds and experiences that might be working in a different discipline; involves on-going or in-depth support and interaction. Collaboration may include resource support.
- **Advice**: Interaction and dialogue with people who have more experience and have taught in the same discipline; may include questions or concepts that are highly contextual and often student focused. Advice may include resource support.

Resource support, collaboration, and advice were coded within formal and informal mentoring higher order codes. We interpret the additional types of mentoring as layered. To illustrate, we found that formal mentoring might include resource support, collaboration, and/or advice. Similarly, informal mentoring might also include resource support, collaboration, and/or advice. We also interpret these types as building upon one another with resource support as being more widely accessible and collaboration and advice as being more difficult for participants to come by.

Table 3. Types of mentoring

	Informal	Formal	Resource support	Collaboration	Advice
Graduate student (n = 17)	16 (94%)	6 (35.3%)	8 (47.5%)	7 (41.2%)	12 (70.5%)
Early career (n=10)	6 (60%)	0 (0%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)

Overall, we found that formal mentoring examples were limited in the participant narratives. Only six graduate student instructors described experiences of formal mentoring, and none of our early career participants identified experiences of formal mentoring. Examples of formal mentoring included weekly meetings with an advisor, regular meetings with peers, and graduate student seminars or support groups. GS15 describes their experience with formal mentoring:

> And we also have this regular meeting, all the grad students who teach online . . . everybody is expressing their concerns, everyone is talking about their experiences, and we share this knowledge together, so I found it to be useful as well, having this.

In this excerpt, we see that graduate student instructors are coming together to engage and share knowledge regularly. Due to their similar backgrounds and on-going, two-way engagement, this narrative segment was also coded as collaboration.

When it comes to informal mentoring, there were a lot of nuances among both populations as to what participants described as informal mentoring. All but one graduate student instructor shared

examples of informal mentoring. Not only did graduate student instructors have access to more informal mentoring, but the informal mentoring that they received consisted of more advice than the informal mentoring early career instructors received.

In the following excerpts, mentoring at the advice level is provided both formally and informally. In both the formal and informal advice excerpts, advice is highly contextual. GS19 illustrates an example of formal mentoring that involved receiving advice:

> And he was very open to me suggesting things. We met weekly, actually . . . He gave a lot of advice on just how to handle students and various issues that come up . . . he provided support in updating material and I don't know . . . I think I . . . we fit very well in that sense because he wasn't like micromanaging me but he also gave me a lot of freedom to just kind of play around with different kinds of material.

GS21 offers an example of informal mentoring that included receiving advice:

> Within my school, the . . . supervisor of course has been great. If there are issues or anything like that, I can go talk to him, but also just go talk to him about anything that's happening and he's great with advice and stuff like that. . . . He's been super helpful.

Overall, we found that advice was not as readily available to participants because it takes someone who has experienced situations like what the participant is going through to provide this higher level of mentoring.

We only identified one example of advice among the early career instructors. Most of these participants identified resource support as the only mentoring they received. EC24 offers an example of resource support: "I've had a couple of colleagues who are also teaching online classes that I can go and ask questions of once in a while, but not much."

Quite often, as we read participant transcripts, we could see that participants were working out what qualified as mentoring as they responded. This was most evident when participants would answer that they didn't receive mentoring or didn't receive much mentoring, but then they would proceed to illustrate examples of mentoring that they experienced. GS16 illustrates this:

> Hardly any. After, I've been in regular touch . . . with the major professor for consulting . . . Sometimes they have good suggestions. But apart from that there is not really any ongoing mentorship for how to be an effective teacher or instructor for the [online] course.

This example was coded as resource support, but it is important to recognize that, while the participant seems to have received some guidance, they articulated that additional mentoring could help them become a more effective teacher. This participant received informal resource support but expresses a desire for a higher level of mentoring. GS12 expresses similar sentiments:

> People have been really supportive. But in the ways in which I think about mentorship, building a relationship with someone else, and being able to—someone else who's taught online. It's being able to problem solve or talk through ideas or that sort of thing, I haven't experienced that.

While these participants have had access to mentoring, they have not had access to the type of mentoring they desire.

In terms of access, not only did we find that participants do not always have access to the type of mentoring they would like, but we also found more generally that access to mentoring was inconsistent. For our graduate student instructors, all except one participant had access to mentoring. However, it's worth noting that not all participants had access to formal mentoring. Only six of 17 graduate students had access to formal mentoring opportunities. Two graduate level participants said they had "very little" and "hardly any" mentoring but proceeded to identify examples of informal mentoring that they received. Only one graduate level participant had no mentoring.

The picture looks very different when considering the early career participants. Early career instructors in our study received no formal mentoring, although they did share examples of informal mentoring. Examples of mentoring were primarily at the resource support level. Three of 10 participants shared examples of mentoring at the advice or collaboration level.

The findings from the early career and graduate student online instructors suggest that both groups desire professional development support from colleagues in their departments, which supports Martin et al. (2019) assertion that faculty need more experienced role models who can share effective online teaching strategies. Some of our participants did not have access to the types of mentoring they wanted, and many expressed a desire for more mentoring. These findings align with previous researchers who identified a lack of institutional support for mentoring programs (Schmidt, Hodge, and Tschida 2013; Gabriel et al. 2008). Further, many instructors in our study did not have access to advice from other experienced online instructors. These findings support Leary et al.'s (2020) observation of the slow growth of professional development programs for online instructors.

Researchers have noted a lack of research into online instructor mentoring (Lowenthal et al. 2019; Ko and Zhadko 2023). Our study addressed this gap by examining the mentoring that online instructors are receiving and how it is, and is not, meeting their needs. This study extends the conversation in two main ways. First, by focusing on two cohorts, our study shows that the needs of the early career instructors may be getting overlooked. Second, past research has largely focused on the basic structure of mentoring relationships, such as formal/informal or how the relationships are configured such as dyadic/group (Ko Zhadko 2023). This study contributes to an understanding of what happens in mentoring interactions, which in our study was characterized as resource support, collaboration, and advice.

LIMITATIONS

One main limitation of this study is that, since the pre-survey data was de-identified, we cannot link potentially valuable demographic characteristics of participants to the narrative data. While we know the general demographics of the graduate student instructors and early career instructors, we cannot determine whether experiences differed based on gender or graduate students' experience levels, for example.

Given that we are looking to better understand participant mentoring experiences, we would have also liked to engage in respondent validation (Maxwell 2008). Narrative research relies on the co-construction of stories in a social context. In future narrative studies, and in the spirit of co-construction, we would like to share preliminary insights and findings with participants in order to explore whether and where our own interpretations align with or diverge from their understandings.

A final limitation worth mentioning is that we only looked at one question in the overall data set, and the full study was not focused on mentoring. Future studies could ask more questions about

mentoring and incorporate additional methods, such as participant observation, for an even richer set of narratives and data.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While there are multiple sources for mentoring, including professional staff who provide support resources and colleagues who offer collaboration and advice, there appears to be little coordination among mentoring sources. A mentoring policy might help to promote coordination among the various sources as it would clarify the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and make it easier for departments to work together. In our context, coordination would need to occur, at minimum, between academic units and our centralized online learning unit. Additionally, policy discussions across units should involve representatives from all stakeholder groups, including instructors, professional staff, departmental support, and administrators, with particular emphasis on including individuals from groups that would be enacting the policy.

Our analysis also revealed that some types of mentoring, such as informal resource support, appear to be easier for instructors to access. Other types of mentoring, such as collaboration and advice, appear to be more difficult for instructors to access, though participants expressed interest in accessing these sources. We also see that graduate student instructors have greater access to mentoring, compared to early career instructors. We believe that this is partly structural and partly due to a lack of incentive among senior instructors to mentor newer instructors. A mentoring policy could help provide more access to different types of mentoring, particularly for our early career instructors. As suggested by Johannessen and Bristol (2016), we believe that addressing access to mentoring could lead to multiple benefits for current instructors and increased retention and recruitment of new instructors, particularly women and minority instructors.

We recommend the following actionable steps for units that desire to support mentoring opportunities for new online instructors:

1. **Consider the benefits of centralizing mentoring resources and programs.** As a centralized unit, we currently rely on various departments and programs to support their instructors with mentoring opportunities. We could contribute by facilitating improved coordination across units and promoting mentoring as a valuable aspect of professional development for new online instructors.
2. **Recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach to mentoring will not work for everyone.** We found that many participants desired additional mentoring opportunities, even when they valued the opportunities currently available to them. Offering a range of different sources and types of mentoring will allow new instructors the ability to determine how and when mentoring will most effectively meet their needs.
3. **Assess the needs of early career instructors.** We found that early career instructors receive far less mentoring support than graduate student instructors, even though both groups may be new to online teaching.
4. **Cultivate opportunities for dialogue and support potential mentors.** New instructors want to learn from experienced instructors. We noted a desire from participants to go beyond meeting more superficial resources to delve into more nuanced, contextual discussions relevant to their online teaching experiences. Supporting this dialogue may require an intentional allocation of resources to mentors.

CONCLUSION

This study explored mentoring experiences among graduate student and early career instructors. We sought to better understand how these new online instructors identify, describe, and experience mentoring and if there are any differences between these groups. We also sought to identify what counts as mentoring to our participants as well as the significance of mentoring to both groups. As part of this study, we explored mentoring policy in higher education and identified some considerations relevant to policy development in our context. Through our narrative analysis we identified various sources of mentoring and types of mentoring experienced by our participants. We explored these themes along with the subtheme of access to mentoring. Then we considered our findings through a policy lens, identifying some implications and recommendations worth further consideration. It is our hope that this glimpse into the mentoring experiences of new online instructors offers a starting point for us and others to improve upon professional development opportunities for online instructors.

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ETHICS

This research project was approved by the Oregon State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

DISCLOSURE

Generative AI was not used at any stage of this research project.

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APPENDIX

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Description	Inclusion/Exclusion	Examples
Presence or Absence of Mentoring	Mentoring+	Mentoring is present but source of mentoring is unknown, unclear, or unexpected.	Includes identifies or describes an experience of mentoring; unexpected examples include students, models that may not involve people.	"Just meeting every couple of months" (EC27)
	Mentoring-	Mentoring is absent; potential sources or lost opportunities for mentorship may be mentioned.	Includes "none", "very little" "not much" but may identify how they wanted or expected mentoring to occur.	"…there is not really any ongoing mentorship for how to be an effective teacher…." (GS16)
Sources of Mentoring	Online division professional staff	Mentoring, including interaction or activities, that involve someone whose primarily role within the online learning division is to support teaching faculty.	Includes specific mentions of the online learning division or someone from the online learning division that has provided mentoring.	"My first year of teaching I received a lot of mentorship from the [online learning] staff." (GS9)
	Graduate Student Peers	Mentoring, including interaction or activities, that involve similarly experienced peers.	Includes peers/graduate teaching assistants/teaching assistants as sources of mentoring.	"People from my same cohort that also started off teaching online…. we share feedback with each other, the issues we've been having with the software, with the students, how we fix them, with our syllabi. It's kind of peer mentor." (GS4)
	Faculty or Departmental Support	Mentoring, including interaction or activities, that involve more experienced faculty or faculty identified as peers.	Includes professor/instructor/ supervisor/advisor/colleague; past course instructors of the participant.	"I've had a couple of colleagues who are also teaching online classes that I can go and ask questions of once in a while…" (EC24)

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Description	Inclusion/Exclusion	Examples
Types of Mentoring	Formal or regular	Support that is ongoing and regular, more than once a term or every couple of months.	Includes weekly meetings with an advisor; regular meetings with peers; grad student seminars or support groups. Excludes: single consult at beginning of term.	"…the instructor who created the course taught the other section of it and so in Fall term, my first term, we would meet every week to discuss things that happened in the past week, what to expect from the next week…" (GS22)
	Informal or irregular	Support that is provided on an as-needed basis; may be ongoing, unscheduled.	Includes asking technical questions. Excludes regular intervals.	"Just informally, through other faculty that works in the program. I've received just more that troubleshooting, kind of like throw me into a class that was already established and then will work through it and talk about issues that come up." (EC14)
	Resource support	Support involving limited interactions with people that have knowledge of online learning. They provide answers to one-time questions and/or resources.	Includes providing training, sharing resources, and communicating best practices. Excludes on-going or in-depth support.	"I send emails once in a while to [online learning] faculty support, and they tell me how to fix ... it's always for some particular question." (EC6)
	Collaboration	Interaction provided by people with similar backgrounds and experiences but might be working in a different discipline; involves on-going or in-depth support and interaction.	Includes conversations among fellow graduate teaching assistants or similar peer groups.	"When I was teaching online, there was a group of students who taught the same exact course, because it was a core course. So, I really relied heavily on my peers for help who had been teaching before me." (EC25)
	Advice	Interaction and dialogue with people who have more experience and have taught in the same discipline.	Includes questions and concepts that are highly contextual and often student focused. Excludes different disciplines, peers, started teaching at the same time.	"[My supervisor] gave a lot of advice on just how to handle students and various issues that come up." (GS19)